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| **What is Art?**  There is no universally accepted definition of art. Although commonly used to describe something of **beauty**, or a skill which produces an **aesthetic** result, there is no clear line in principle between (say) a unique piece of handmade sculpture, and a mass-produced but visually attractive item. We might say that art requires thought - some kind of creative impulse - but this raises more questions: for example, how much thought is required? If someone flings paint at a canvas, hoping by this action to create a work of art, does the result automatically constitute art?  Even the notion of 'beauty' raises obvious questions. If I think my kid sister's unmade bed constitutes something 'beautiful', or aesthetically pleasing, does that make it art? If not, does its status change if a million people happen to agree with me, but my kid sister thinks it is just a pile of clothes? |

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| **http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/images-renaissance/donatello-david1.jpg** [**David by Donatello**](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/david-by-donatello.htm)**(1440s) Bargello, Florence.** | **Art: Multiplicity of Forms, Types and Genres**  Before trying to define art, the first thing to be aware of, is its huge scope.  Art is a global activity which encompasses a **host of disciplines**, as evidenced by the range of words and phrases which have been invented to describe its various forms. Examples of such phraseology include: "Fine Arts", "Liberal Arts", "Visual Arts", "Decorative Arts", "Applied Arts", "Design", "Crafts", "Performing Arts", and so on.  Drilling down, many specific categories are classified according to the **materials** used, such as: drawing, painting, sculpture (inc. ceramic sculpture), "glass art", "metal art", "illuminated gospel manuscripts", "aerosol art", "fine art photography", "animation", and so on. Sub-categories include: painting in oils, watercolours, acrylics; sculpture in bronze, stone, wood, porcelain; to name but a tiny few. Other sub-branches include different **genre** **categories**, like: narrative, portrait, genre-works, landscape, still life.  In addition, entirely **new forms of art** have emerged during the 20th century, such as: [assemblage](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/assemblage-art.htm), conceptualism, [collage](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/collage.htm), earthworks, [installation](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/installation-art.htm), graffiti, and video, as well as the broad conceptualist movement which challenges the essential value of an objective "work of art". For more, see: [Types of Art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/art-types.htm). |

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|  | **Definition of Art is Limited by Era and Culture**  Another thing to be aware of, is the fact that art reflects and belongs to the **period** and **culture** from which it is spawned.  After all, how can we compare prehistoric murals (eg. stone age cave painting) or [tribal art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/ancient-art/tribal-art.htm), or native [Oceanic art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/ancient-art/oceanic.htm), or primitive [African art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/ancient-art/african.htm), with Michelangelo's 16th century Old Testament frescoes on the walls and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Political events are the most obvious era-factors that influence art: for example, art styles like Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism were products of political uncertainty and upheavals.  Cultural differences also act as natural borders. After all, Western draughtsmanship is light years away from Chinese calligraphy; and what Western artform compares with the art of [origami paper folding](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/east-asian-art/origami.htm) from Japan? Religion is a major cultural variable that alters the shape of the artistic envelope. The Baroque style was strongly influenced by the Catholic Counter-Reformation, while [Islamic art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/islamic-art.htm) (like Orthodox Christianity), forbids certain types of artistic iconography.  In other words, whatever definition of art we arrive at, it is bound to be limited to our era and culture. Even then, categories like [Outsider art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/outsider-art.htm) have to be taken into consideration. See also: [Primitivism/Primitive Art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/primitivism.htm).  **Conclusion**  As you can see from the above, the world of art is a highly complex entity, not only in terms of its multiplicity of forms and types, but also in terms of its historical and cultural roots. Therefore a simple definition, or even a broad consensus as to what can be labelled art, is likely to prove highly elusive. |

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|  | **History of the Definition of Art**  For a guide to movements and periods, see also: [History of Art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art.htm).  **Classical Meaning of Art**  The original classical definition - derived from the Latin word "ars" (meaning "skill" or "craft") - is a useful starting point. This broad approach leads to art being defined as: "the product of a body of knowledge, most often using a set of skills." Thus Renaissance painters and sculptors were viewed merely as highly skilled artisans (interior-decorators?). No wonder Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo went to such efforts to elevate the status of artists (and by implication art itself) onto a more intellectual plane. |

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|  | **Post-Renaissance Meaning of Art**  The emergence of the great European academies of art reflected the gradual upgrading of the subject. New and enlightened branches of philosophy also contributed to this change of image. By the mid-18th century, the mere demonstration of technical skills was insufficient to qualify as art - it now needed an "aesthetic" component - it had to be seen as something "beautiful."  At the same time, the concept of "utilitarianism" (functionality or usefulness) was used to distinguish the more noble "fine arts" (art for art's sake), like painting and sculpture, from the lesser forms of "applied art", such as crafts and commercial [design](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/design.htm) work, and the ornamental "decorative arts", like textile design and interior design.  Thus, by the end of the 19th century, art was separated into at least two broad categories: namely, fine art and the rest - a situation that reflected the cultural snobbery and moral standards of the European establishment. Furthermore, despite some erosion of faith in the aesthetic standards of Renaissance ideology - which remained a powerful influence throughout the world of fine art - even painting and sculpture had to conform to certain aesthetic rules in order to be considered "true art".  **Meaning of Art During the Early 20th Century**  Then came Cubism (1907-14), which rocked the fine arts establishment to its foundations. Not simply because Picasso introduced a non-naturalistic branch of painting and sculpture, but because it shattered the monotheistic Renaissance approach to how art related to the world around it. Thus, Cubism's main contribution was to act as a sort of catalyst for a host of new movements which greatly expanded the theory and practice of art, such as: Suprematism, Constructivism, Dada, Neo-Plasticism, Surrealism and Conceptualism, as well as various realist styles, such as Social and Socialist Realism. In practice, this proliferation of new styles and artistic techniques led to a new broadening of the meaning and definition of art. In its escape from its "Renaissance straitjacket", and all the associated rules concerning "objectivity" (eg. on perspective, useable materials, content, composition, and so on), fine art now boasted a significant element of "subjectivity". Artists suddenly found themselves with far greater freedom to create paintings and sculpture according to their own subjective values. In fact, one might say that from this point "art" started to become "indefinable".  The decorative and applied arts underwent a similar transformation due to the availability of a vastly increased range of commercial products. However, the resultant increase in the number of associated design and crafts disciplines did not have any significant impact on the definition and meaning of art as a whole.  **Meaning of Art Post-World War II**  The cataclysm of WWII led to the demise of Paris as the capital of world art, and its replacement by New York. This new American orientation encouraged art to become more of a commercial product, and loosen its connection with existing traditions of aestheticism - a trend furthered by the emergence of Abstract Expressionism, Pop-Art, and the activities of the new breed of celebrity artists like Andy Warhol. All of a sudden, even the most mundane items and concepts became elevated to the status of "art". Under the influence of this populist approach, conceptualists introduced new artforms, like assemblage, installation, video and performance. In due course, graffiti added its own mark, as did numerous styles of reinterpretation, like [Neo-Dada](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/neo-dada.htm), [Neo-Expressionism](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/neo-expressionism.htm), and Neo-Pop, to name but three. Schools and colleges of art throughout the world dutifully preached the new polytheism, adding further fuel to the bonfire of [Renaissance art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/renaissance-art.htm) traditions.  **Postmodernism and the Meaning of Art**  The redefinition of art during the last three decades of the 20th century has been lent added intellectual weight by theorists of the postmodernist movement. According to the postmoderns, the focus has shifted from artistic skill to the "meaning" of the work produced. In addition, "how" a work is "experienced" by spectators has become a critical component in its aesthetic value. The phenomenal success of contemporary artists like Damien Hirst, as well as Gilbert and George, is clear evidence in support of this view. For more about experimental artists, see: [avant-garde art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/avant-garde-art.htm). |

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|  | **A Working Definition of Art**  In light of this historical development in the meaning of "art", one can perhaps make a crude attempt at a "working" definition of the subject, along the following lines:  Art is created when an artist creates a beautiful object, or produces a stimulating experience that is considered by his audience to have artistic merit.  This is simply a "working" definition: broad enough to encompass most forms of contemporary art, but narrow enough to exclude "events" whose "artistic" content falls below accepted levels. In addition, please note that the word "artist" is included to allow for the context of the work; the word "beautiful" is included to reflect the need for some "aesthetic" value; while the phrase "that is considered by his audience to have artistic merit" is included to reflect the need for some basic acceptance of the artist's efforts.  **Theory and Philosophy of Art: Discussion Issues**  **Q. If We Appreciate Its Positive Impact, Do We Need to Define Art?**  For centuries, if not millennia, people have been emotionally affected - sometimes overwhelmed - by works of art: from [Greek Sculpture](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/antiquity/greek-sculpture.htm), to Byzantine architecture, the stunning creativity of Renaissance and Baroque [Old Masters](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/old-masters.htm) like Donatello, Raphael and Rembrandt, and [famous painters](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-artists.htm) of the modern era, like Van Gogh, Picasso and Auguste Rodin. Poetry, ballet and films can be equally uplifting. So while we may not be able to explain precisely what art is, we cannot deny the impact it has on our lives - one reason why [public art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/public-art.htm) is worth supporting.  **Q. How Does a Definition of the Meaning of Art Help Us?**  The very essence of creativity means it cannot be defined and pigeon-holed. Any attempt at doing so, will quickly become out-of-date and thus pointless, even counter-productive. What happens, for instance, if an artist produces something that by popular consensus is "art", but isn't accepted as such by the arts establishment? It's worth remembering that we still can't define a "table" or an "elephant", but it doesn't cause us much difficulty!  **Q. Is Art Simply a Reflection of Our Personal Values?**  It's fair to say that someone educated in the values of Renaissance art, and who therefore has a reasonable understanding of traditional painting, is less likely to regard postmodernist installations as art, than a person without such an understanding. Similarly, a person who loves TV and thinks museums are generally rather boring and unexciting places, is more likely to be impressed with contemporary video art than someone else who is comfortable with traditional museum exhibitions. Because of this, one might say that a person's attitude to art says more about his or her personal values, than the art itself.  **Q. Who Has the Right to Define Art?**  Since no consensus among [art critics](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/art-critics.htm) as to the meaning of art is likely to emerge anytime soon, which set of "experts" should be allowed to take charge: Artists, sociologists, historians, lawyers, philosophers, archeologists, anthropologists, or psychologists? After all, the world is full of so-called "experts" - structuralists, proceduralists, functionalists, as well as the usual crop of political theorists like Marxists and so on - who can't agree on what counts as art. So who do we give the job to? |

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|  | **How is Art Classified?**  Traditional and contemporary art encompasses activities as diverse as:  Architecture, music, opera, theatre, dance, painting, sculpture, illustration, drawing, cartoons, printmaking, ceramics, stained glass, photography, installation, video, film and cinematography, to name but a few.  All these activities are commonly referred to as "the Arts" and are commonly. classified into several overlapping categories, such as: *fine*, *visual*, *plastic*, *decorative*, *applied*, and *performing*.  Disagreement persists as to the precise composition of these categories, but here is a generally accepted classification.  **1. Fine Arts**  This category includes those artworks that are created primarily for aesthetic reasons ('art for art's sake') rather than for commercial or functional use. Designed for its uplifting, life-enhancing qualities, [fine art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/fine-art.htm) typically denotes the traditional, Western European 'high arts', such as:  • [**Drawing**](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing.htm) Using [charcoal](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/charcoal-drawings.htm), [chalk](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/chalk-drawings.htm), [crayon](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/conte-crayon-drawings.htm), [pastel](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/pastel-drawings.htm) or with [pencil](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/pencil-drawings.htm) or [pen and ink](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/pen-and-ink-drawings.htm). Two major applications include: [illuminated manuscripts](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/cultural-history-of-ireland/illuminated-manuscripts.htm) (c.600-1200) and [book illustration](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/illustration.htm).  • [**Painting**](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/fine-art-painting.htm) Using [oils](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/oil-painting.htm), [watercolour](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/watercolour-painting.htm), [gouache](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/gouache.htm), [acrylics](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/acrylic-painting.htm), [ink and wash](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/ink-and-wash.htm), or the more old-fashioned [tempera](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/tempera.htm) or [encaustic](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/encaustic.htm) paints. For an explanation of colourants, see: [Colour in Painting](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/colour-in-painting.htm) and [Colour Pigments, Types, History](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/artist-paints/colour-pigments.htm).  • [**Printmaking**](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking.htm) Using simple methods like [woodcuts](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking/woodcuts.htm) or stencils, the more demanding techniques of [engraving](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking/engraving.htm), [etching](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking/etching.htm) and [lithography](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking/lithography.htm), or the more modern forms like [screen-printing](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking/screen-printing.htm), foil imaging or [giclee prints](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/printmaking/giclee-prints.htm). For a significant application of printmaking, see: [Poster Art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/poster-art.htm).  • [**Sculpture**](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture.htm) In [bronze](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/bronze.htm), [stone](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/stone.htm), [marble](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/marble.htm), [wood](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/wood-carving.htm), or clay.  Another type of Western fine art, which originated in China, is [calligraphy](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/calligraphy.htm): the highly complex form of stylized writing. |

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|  | **The Evolution of Fine Arts**  After primitive forms of cave painting, figurine sculptures and other types of [ancient art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/ancient-art.htm), there occured the golden era of Greek art and other schools of Classical Antiquity. The sacking of Rome (c.400-450) introduced the dead period of the Dark Ages (c.450-1000), brightened only by [Celtic art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/cultural-history-of-ireland/celtic-art.htm) and Ultimate La Tene Celtic designs, after which the history of art in the West is studded with a wide variety of artistic 'styles' or 'movements' - such as: Gothic (c.1100-1300), Renaissance (c.1300-1600), Baroque (17th century), Neo-Classicism (18th century), Romanticism (18th-19th century), Realism and Impressionism (19th century), Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Pop-Art (20th century).  For a brief review of modernism (c.1860-1965), see [Modern art movements](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/modern-art-movements.htm); for a guide to postmodernism, (c.1965-present) see our list of the main [Contemporary art movements](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/contemporary-art-movements.htm).  **The Tradition**  Fine art was the traditional type of [Academic art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/academic-art.htm) taught at the great schools, such as the the *Accademia dell'Arte del Disegno* in Florence, the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome, the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, and the Royal Academy in London. One of the key legacies of the academies was their theory of [linear perspective](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/linear-perspective.htm) and their ranking of the [painting genres](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting-genres.htm), which classified all works into 5 types: history, portrait, genre-scenes, landscape or still life.  **Patrons**  Ever since the advent of Christianity, the largest and most significant sponsor of fine art has been the Christian Church. Not surprisingly therefore, the largest body of painting and/or sculpture has been [religious art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/religious-art.htm), as has other specific forms like [icons](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/icons.htm) and [altarpiece art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/altarpiece.htm).  **2. Visual Arts**  [Visual art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/visual-art.htm) includes all the fine arts as well as new media and contemporary forms of expression such as Assemblage, Collage, [Conceptual](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/conceptual-art.htm), Installation and Performance art, as well as [Photography](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/fine-art-photography.htm), (see also: [Is Photography Art?](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/photography-art.htm)) and film-based forms like [Video Art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/video-art.htm) and [Animation](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/animation-art.htm), or any combination thereof. Another type, often created on a monumental scale is the new [environmental land art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/land-art.htm).  **3. Plastic Arts**  The term [plastic art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/plastic-art.htm) typically denotes three-dimensional works employing materials that can be moulded, shaped or manipulated (plasticized) in some way: such as, clay, plaster, stone, metals, wood (sculpture), paper (origami) and so on. For three-dimensional artworks made from everyday materials and "[found objects](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/found-objects.htm)", including Marcel Duchamp's "[readymades](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/readymades.htm)" (1913-21), please see: [Junk art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/junk-art.htm).  **4. Decorative Arts**  This category traditionally denotes functional but ornamental art forms, such as works in glass, clay, wood, metal, or textile fabric. This includes all forms of [jewellery](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/jewellery-art.htm) and [mosaic art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/mosaic-art.htm), as well as [ceramics](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/ceramics.htm), (exemplified by beautifully decorated styles of [ancient pottery](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/pottery.htm) notably [Chinese](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/east-asian-art/chinese-pottery.htm) and [Greek Pottery](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/antiquity/greek-pottery.htm)) furniture, furnishings, [stained glass](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/stained-glass-art.htm) and [tapestry art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/tapestry-art.htm). Noted styles of [decorative art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/decorative-art.htm) include: [Rococo Art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/rococo.htm) (1700-1800), [Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/pre-raphaelite-brotherhood.htm) (fl. 1848-55), [Japonism](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/japonism.htm) (c.1854-1900), Art Nouveau (c.1890-1914), Art Deco (c.1925-40), Edwardian, and Retro.  Arguably the *greatest* period of decorative or applied art in Europe occurred during the 17th/18th centuries at the French Royal Court. For more, see: [French Decorative Arts](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/french-decorative-arts.htm) (c.1640-1792); [French Designers](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/french-designers.htm) (c.1640-1792); and [French Furniture](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/french-furniture.htm) (c.1640-1792).  **5. Performance Arts**  This type refers to public performance events. Traditional varieties include, theatre, opera, music, and ballet. Contemporary [performance art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/performance-art.htm) also includes any activity in which the artist's physical presence acts as the medium. Thus it encompasses, mime, face or body painting, and the like. A hyper-modern type of performance art is known as [Happenings](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/happenings.htm).  **6. Applied Arts**  This category encompasses all activities involving the application of aesthetic designs to everyday functional objects. While fine art provides intellectual stimulation to the viewer, [applied art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/applied-art.htm) creates utilitarian items (a cup, a couch or sofa, a clock, a chair or table) using aesthetic principles in their design. [Folk art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/folk-art.htm) is predominantly involved with this type of creative activity. Applied art includes architecture, [computer art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/computer-art.htm), photography, industrial design, graphic design, fashion design, interior design, as well as all decorative arts. Noted styles include, [*Bauhaus Design School*](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/bauhaus-design-school.htm), as well as [Art Nouveau](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/art-nouveau.htm), and [Art Deco](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/art-deco.htm). One of the most important forms of 20th applied art is [architecture](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/architecture-history.htm), notably supertall [skyscraper architecture](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/architecture/skyscraper.htm), which dominates the urban environment in New York, Chicago, Hong Kong and many other cities around the world. For a review of this type of public art, see: [American Architecture](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/architecture/american.htm) (1600-present). |

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